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THE STUDY CLUB

CONFLICTS IN *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*

For most beginners Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* is regarded as his most popular play. It is classified as a comedy for the reason that all its conflicts are mediated and harmonized without sacrificing the life of any of the characters. The mediators are Jessica, Antonio, and Portia, but by far the greatest is Portia. What follows is a discussion of eight of these conflicts, together with some notes.

1. *Will* vs. *Will*. Here "is the will of a living daughter (Portia's will) curbed by the will of a dead father." There are many claimants for Portia's hand, "For the four winds blow in from every coast renowned suitors." If we include the Marquis of Montferrat, nine suitors are named in the play, though only three appear in person. The only one she loves is Bassanio, and he in turn loves her. They could go to the church at once, and there would be no conflict, were it not for her father's will requiring that she be chosen by the device of the three caskets. Of course she could ignore the caskets, substituting objectivity for subjectivity toward the old family; but there is danger that such an act will bring trouble to the new family as it did for Desdemona.

The first suitor to choose a casket is the Prince of Morocco. He came in apologizing for his outside—his complexion—and then chose the golden casket which had only its "outside to behold." He holds up his courage as his chief claim for Portia. Though courage is an admirable trait of character, and with the primitive cave man was probably an adequate basis for marriage, it will not suffice now.

The second suitor to choose a casket is the Prince of Arragon. He holds up merit as his chief claim for Portia, and chooses the silver casket with the inscription: "Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves." Merit, too, is admirable, and doubtless was also an ample basis for marriage when such affairs were arranged by parents, but it will not suffice now.

The successful chooser is Bassanio. His claim is love—the only adequate basis for marriage; and blinded with this possession he chooses the casket made of lead on which is an inscription that threatens. Portia takes an active part in this particular choosing. (a) She does most of

the talking. (b) She speaks first. (c) One of her first words is "hazard" which is the principal word in the inscription on the leaden casket. (d) She says to him, "Beshrew your eyes." (e) She sends Nerissa and the rest from the room that they may see no act of objectivity. (f) She has music to sound that Nerissa and the rest may hear no words of objectivity. (g) She arranges for a song containing words rhyming with "lead." Her first speech after he opens the leaden casket is addressed to "her lord, her governor, her king" to restore the subjectivity sacrificed or ready to be sacrificed during the choosing.

2. *Bassanio vs. Poverty.* Bassanio's conflict comes from the fact that he has no more money with which to continue his wooing of Portia. He appeals to his friend Antonio, who borrows the money of the Jew, signing the death bond to get it. Antonio's mediation of this conflict leads him on into a still greater conflict.

3. *Antonio vs. Shylock.* At the very hour of the happy marriage at Belmont the black messenger at the door announces that Antonio is in jail facing death. The first attempt to mediate this conflict is made by Antonio himself when he begs for his life of Shylock. The second attempt is made by the Duke when he suggests magnanimity. The third is by Bassanio when he offers money (Portia's money) to Shylock. The fourth is by Gratiano when he gives Shylock a piece of his mind. Then comes Portia, who fails when she tries mercy but succeeds when she tries justice.

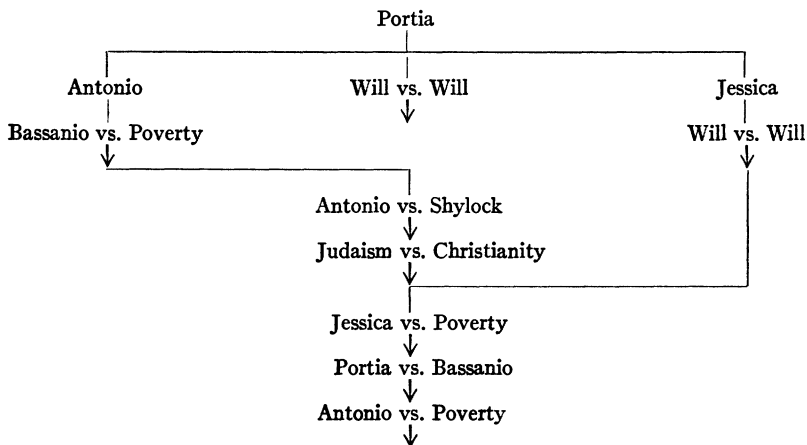
4. *Judaism vs. Christianity.* Though Shylock is willing to leave the courtroom without even the money they owed him, he is not permitted to do so. He would soon be back in court with another victim. He is required to change his life and become a Christian.

5. *Will vs. Will.* Again we have the conflict of the father's will and of the daughter's will, except that in this instance the father is yet living. Jessica mediates this conflict by taking her father's money and eloping with Lorenzo. The money is soon dissipated in wild extravagance at Genoa, and then they set out toward Venice. They get as far as Belmont where they are employed by Portia to care for her house until her return from the trial.

6. *Jessica vs. Poverty.* Shylock is forced to make Jessica and Lorenzo his heirs.

7. *Portia vs. Bassanio.* This is the conflict concerning the rings. Portia makes this one and then mediates it. The author may have used it as a device to get all the principal actors on the stage for the last scene.

8. *Antonio vs. Poverty*. When Portia mediates this conflict she taxes our credulity to the breaking point. It seems as if the masters of the newly arrived, richly laden ships would have made their report to the owner of the ships rather than to the heiress at Belmont. The author himself gives it up and says, "You are not to know by what strange accident I chanced on this letter." We are tempted to repeat Antonio's very untruthful but yet very appropriate remark: "I am dumb."



Explain—

Act I, scene 1: (a) "portly sail." (b) "curt'sy." (c) "Plucking the grass" in Venice. (d) "play the fool." (e) "four winds" and "four corners" in Act II, scene 7.

Act I, scene 2: "Yes, yes, it was Bassanio; as I think so was he called."

Act I, scene 3: "Oh what a goodly outside falsehood hath!"

Act II, scene 1: "as fair as any comer."

Act II, scene 2: "as far as God has any ground" in Venice.

Act II, scene 6: "it is worth the pains."

Act II, scene 7: (a) "discover." (b) "thus losers part."

Act III, scene 2: (a) The trick by which in Bassanio's description of Portia language is made to transcend itself. (b) "I come by note." (c) "How much I was a braggart."

Act III, scene 3: "since I am a dog."

Act III, scene 4: "quaint lies," learned where?

Act IV, scene 1: (a) Duke to Portia: "Give me your hand." (b) "no power in the tongue of man." (c) "with all my heart." (d) "Soft." (e) "Had you been there."

Compare—

1. The Marquis of Montferrat and Bassanio with Miles Standish and John Alden; and Portia's "fair speechless messages" with Priscilla's "Why don't you speak for yourself, John?"

2. *The Merchant of Venice* and Henry Ford's *The Dearborn Independent* in their treatment of the struggle between Judaism and Christianity.

3. Portia's "there is no power in Venice can alter a decree established" with the United States Constitution's "The President shall . . . have power to grant reprieves and pardons."

4. *The Merchant of Venice* and the Sermon on the Mount as to the conflict between the old order—justice—and the new order—mercy. "And earthly power doth then show likest God's When mercy seasons justice." "Ye have heard that it hath been said (old order) Thou shalt love thy neighbor and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you (new order) Love your enemies."

5. *The Merchant of Venice* and Conscription in showing a greater respect for money than for human life.

6. The Venetian court and the modern juvenile court in their study of the criminal.

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